

The Fairford Few

A small group of Airmen keep a base in England ready for when needed

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr. — photos by Master Sgt. John Lasky

The “Subway” sandwich shop, “Community Bank” and base library are all situated in quonset huts dating to World War II.

A new face here, some new paint there, but many aspects of life at this small base seem to have changed little over the last 60 years.

Outside, a small deer grazes on the lawn alongside a munitions building.

People are so scarce there’s no need for a fulltime doctor or dentist — they only travel to Royal Air Force Fairford once a month to provide treatment.

Its military working dog section consists of a

single dog — and it doesn’t even belong to the Air Force. The United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence Police owns it.

In fact, the base doesn’t even have aircraft.

Thing is, this Mayberry-sized town is the Air Force’s future.

“Every time we get into a fistfight somewhere — either in this area or beyond this [area of responsibility] — Fairford flexes its muscles and pluses up,” said Gen. Robert Foglesong, U.S. Air Forces in Europe commander.

It’s easy to compare Fairford to the Incredible

Stonehenge, which sits less than 90 minutes by car from Royal Air Force Fairford, England, is believed to have been built

5,000 years ago. The outer stones, weighing as much as 50 tons, were believed to have been transported as far away as 20 miles. RAF Fairford offers billeting that makes for an ideal location to get out and see Stonehenge and other sites in the scenic Cotswold region of England.





Tech. Sgt. Mark Maskule reviews the preannouncement log with Constable Philip Rowe at the front gate of Royal Air Force Fairford, England. Constable Rowe describes the air base, and the nearby village that shares the same name, as a quiet place, and the local Airmen as "a reasonable bunch of people."



Hulk. It's small and unassuming until it needs to expand into a military menace.

For decades, the United States believed its greatest threat was the Soviet Union. America amassed large fixed bases in strategic locations along Eastern Europe to counteract the potential communist invasion. When needed, U.S. forces deployed to Europe. It worked, but eventually the concept became outdated.

"It dawned on us in the early '90s that the Soviet Union wasn't going to be the threat we had envisioned," General Foglesong said. "There was a new threat out there, and often it was located at places where we would employ air power and initially the most vertical structure on many air

fields would be the landing lights on the runway. We truly would become an expeditionary force."

The Air Force realized it needed a place with buildings and an infrastructure to handle large numbers of people in a short amount of time. It also needed a place to hone its wartime skills — thus, the birth of contingency bases, one of which is RAF Fairford.

Its core of 200 Airmen and 250 Ministry of Defense employees is able to handle an influx of 2,000 to 3,000 people. It's a mini-wing that can become a large wing in just days. On hand are 733 beds, 50 washers and dryers and 1,000 lockers.

Two bases, one squadron

The 424th Air Base Squadron has two primary installations: RAF Fairford, which is the main base with a runway, and RAF Welford, located 38 miles away, where munitions are stored.

Like most Air Force bases in Europe, RAF Fair-

Airmen reconfigure stacks of wood at one of the numerous munitions hangars at Royal Air Force Wellford, England. The wood is used like bubble wrap as a packing material for transporting heavy armament. The 424th Air Base Squadron Airmen are among approximately 200 assigned to this base in the quaint Cotswold region.



ford and Welford were built during World War II. On D-Day, in June 1944, Horsa gliders launched from both locations. After the war, the bases traded hands many times between the United States and England until December 2000, when the Royal Air Force pulled out of RAF Welford for the last time.

Since then, the most recent change to the 424th includes falling administratively under a group, as opposed to once being under command of the 100th Air Refueling Wing at RAF Mildenhall.

RAF Fairford is one of five units under the command of Col. James Smith, 420th Air Base Group commander, located at Fairford.

“As I see it, I’m providing oversight of course,” Colonel Smith said. “But in a way that allows these isolated units to get together and compare notes. It’s important for geographically separated units to be able to overcome the distance that separates them.”

The 420th Air Base Group does this by telecon-

ferencing and putting a lot of miles on government vehicles.

The base is so small, it ...

Like most air traffic control towers, the Fairford tower is isolated on the far side of the runway. Unlike most towers, which are abuzz with activity and squawking radios, Fairford air traffic controllers get so few airplanes landing and taking off they have to go to another base to remain proficient. Usually less than 10 planes land per month. The two controllers only man the tower when aircraft are scheduled to land on its nearly 10,000 feet of runway.

For a small base, it has a lot of room, almost too much room, it seems. Two or three people

Senior Airman Kevin Lord checks a land mobile radio antenna on top of the air control tower at Royal Air Force Fairford, England. The base’s air control tower doesn’t see much action — until a contingency plus-up hits — as only a handful of aircraft visit the base each month.



work in a room built for 10, but that's the way it's designed. Deployed units will take up the extra space.

Like most small bases around the world, the "Fairford few" have learned to be flexible, many times working on things outside their career fields.

Staff Sgt. Kiera Daniels is a floor chief for the aerospace ground equipment shop. She also was once laying out the base newspaper and was the squadron commander's junior executive. She did all that during her first year-and-a-half on base.

"It isn't unique that I've been doing all these

jobs," she said. "It's what makes this base tick. Out here, we respect each other's jobs. Being smaller means you can see what other people do. You get to better understand what people's jobs are."

It also means greater accountability.

"We have [company grade officers] and NCOs who are stepping up to greater responsibilities because they are at a forward operating base where there are fewer people," Colonel Smith said. "So, we have programs that are being run by technical sergeants that are frequently administered at a main operating base by senior master sergeants."

Senior Airman Arthur Harold works on a universal maintenance stand in the 424th Aerospace Ground Equipment squadron hangar. This quiet base can quickly swell to 3,000 deployed Airmen during contingencies such as Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Friendly village folks

To the average Airman at RAF Fairford, being stationed at a remote location has its advantages and drawbacks.



"It's like a small town," said Airman 1st Class Mathew McGuinn, who works as a munitions controller. "Everybody gets along."

Being a small and unassuming base means Airmen have minimal impact on the local community. Locals like Airmen living and working in their communities. And the feeling is mutual. Despite the cost of homes in the area, it isn't unusual to hear stories about junior enlisted Airmen purchasing homes that start out at \$250,000. Their overseas housing allowances pay a large chunk of their monthly mortgages.

"This is a prime location," said Sergeant Daniels, who's married to Staff Sgt. Jeremy Daniels, also in aerospace ground equipment. "We're close to London, Bath, Avon. All the towns in the local area are beautiful. They are very English. There isn't a McDonald's on every block."

In hamlets with streets made of cobblestone, villagers visit their little neighborhood stores daily to buy what they need for dinner. It's a simple life, where family-run restaurants and pubs are just a stroll away, and fish and chips can be found on all menus.

"It's a good place for families," Sergeant Daniels pointed out. "We at AGE don't have any deployments. Even single people seem to like it here."

The only drawback is being far from medical attention, so Airmen have to travel over an hour to a small Air Force medical clinic at Croughton for routine check-ups, or take a day off if they need to see a specialist two to three hours away at Mildenhall.



At a glance

In addition to it being a forward operating location for bombers, RAF Fairford supports several other mission taskings.

- Primary European forward operating location for the Joint STARS.

- At the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, 14 B-52s landed at RAF Fairford, closely followed by 952 troops.

- Special operations uses the base for Exercise Elipse series — practicing night assault landings.

- It's the primary forward operating location for Air Combat Command Global Power missions, consisting of B-1 Lancers and B-52H Stratofortresses.

- Though not a core mission, the base also plays host to the Royal International Air Tattoo every July.

"I don't really like traveling that far for an appointment," Sergeant Daniels said. "It takes all day, but we just find a way to work around it."

Good things in small packages

Unlike civilian towns and villages around the world that want to prosper and grow, Fairford's mission is to remain small.

Limited manpower is an overriding theme for the base. It's designed to be minimally manned. Deploying units are expected to bring their own support troops, including flight surgeons, if the unit plans to fly.

Mildenhall also helps RAF Fairford remain small by accomplishing all of its military personnel flight and comptroller functions. United Kingdom Ministry of Defense police provide base security.

"If we didn't do that," Colonel Smith said. "Then we'd have to get more people stationed here. The 100th Mission Support Squadron [at Mildenhall] for example, has the people it needs to take care of us. They do a great job on our behalf, and we know they'll continue doing that."

Although Fairford has no doctors or aircraft, one dog and few people, Airmen wouldn't have it any other way. They enjoy the freedom, responsibility and small-town attitude that can be found in few places in the world. But don't let that fool you. It can "hulk up" in a moment's notice. ✪